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How to Cope With Night Shift Work and Jet Lag



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If you currently work at a job that requires you to often drastically change your sleeping schedule, or if you travel a lot, this strategy will help you obtain higher quality sleep during these times which put a lot of stress on the integrity of your sleeping system.

Night Shift Work

A great number of people work the night shift, or work at jobs that require them to work odd hours sometimes extending into the early or late evening. This provides a huge challenge for our sleeping system, because of the improper light exposure / activity levels. As you remember, our exposure to light sets our body temperature rhythm and controls our melatonin levels. If you work a night shift, you're remaining active while your body thinks it's time to sleep. Not only does this provide a strain on your sleeping system, it's also difficult on your emotional life as you're forced to work when everyone else is sleeping, this type of schedule limits your social activities with friends and family. *Unless all your friends and family members work night shifts!*

Because of the lack of light during work, many night shift workers report feeling drowsy during work, it's also not uncommon for night shift workers to doze off when driving home in their cars.

While little can be done to work around the demands on your time, you can incorporate a personal strategy to increase the quality of your sleep and make sure you're more energetic and awake during the night:

1) Artificial Bright Light

Possibly the best way to deal with night time fatigue at the work place would be to have your employer purchase an artificial bright light generator. These light boxes can create up to 5,000 - 10,000 luxes of light and can make a huge difference on your body temperature levels, instantly changing your level of energy and alertness, they make a HUGE difference.

The average price of a light generator is \$200, the investment is well worth the increase of your personal energy levels at work, as it will most likely benefit your employer in the end. Explain to your employer that feeling drowsy and low on energy at work is also a huge safety issue, and that would drastically help improve the energy levels of everyone in the work-place. If he/she is still not convinced, get them to contact us:

Questions@WonderfulSleep.com

If you're exposed to high intensity light while you work the night shift or evening shift, your energy levels will shoot through the roof, your sleep will co-relatively be of much higher quality as your body temperature rhythm will be more balanced, allowing you to sleep deeply, and for a shorter amount of time.

2) Get Exercise before Work

Exercise will create a significant rise in your body temperature rhythm, allowing you to feel more awake and alert during work. The significant drop of body temperature afterwards will make it easier to fall asleep and sleep deeply when you come home.

3) Sleep Time

Most night shift workers come home at around 6 am - 7 am and try to sleep, but the first 3 hours of their sleep is interrupted by morning activity around the house. Remember that the first 3 hours of your sleep is most important as it contains the largest portion of your deep sleep. For this reason you shouldn't go to bed right after you come home from work, wait until everyone in your house leaves for work and the children have eaten breakfast and are in school - this way you can wind down a bit after work and get to sleep.

4) Include a 10-45 minute nap

Because of the lack of sunlight in your schedule, your body will naturally try to sleep LONGER than other people. This is simply how the body reacts to a dark environment, and why people tend to sleep longer during the winter. Chances are you still want to interact with your family and friends during the day, so if you still feel un-rested and drowsy after your sleep, take a very short 10 - 45 minute nap during the day. The brief period of Stage 2 sleep will be very physically recharging and rewarding - allowing you to stay more alert during the day. Don't under estimate the effects of these "Power Naps", they're extremely beneficial.

5) Regular Schedule

Try to maintain your "regular" sleeping schedule during the weekends, as we talked about before the weekend can be a huge enemy to your sleeping system. This is true especially if you work a night shift. By sleeping the same way during the weekend that you do during the weekdays, you ensure that your body temperature rhythm becomes adjusted to this setting, you'll get better sleep and higher energy levels in the long run.

6) Avoiding Light

Avoid light when you leave work by wearing dark sunglasses, this will minimize the chance that your body will get confused and think it's time to wake up. Also make sure that you sleep in a dark room after work, and that your sleep isn't interrupted by bright light. Bright morning light is a major cue for your body that it's rise and shine time, this will limit your sleep drastically.

Rotating Shift Work

Perhaps the only thing worse than a night shift for your sleeping is a work schedule that requires you to switch shifts every single month or week! If you work a night shift one month and a day shift in the next month this is the equivalent for your sleeping system as working in China one month and in New York the next month. It's a huge strain for your sleeping system and can have big effects on your health, energy and emotional levels. If you're in this situation and you have the option of changing your schedule, talk to your employer about it and insist to get a regular day shift, or at least a regular night shift!

The only other way to ease the tension of rotating shift work is to gradually change your sleeping schedule. This will be less of a "shock" for your sleeping system. Before a change of work schedules, start making little changes to your sleeping schedule in advance. If you're shifting from a day shift to a night shift, start sleeping earlier and waking up earlier a few days in advance. If you're shifting from a night shift to a day shift, begin by starting to sleeping later and waking up later.

In conclusion, shift work is and always will be strenuous on the sleeping system. However, by using some of the methods and suggestions in this book you should be able to increase the strength of your sleeping system, get better quality sleep and a higher level of energy.

Jet Lag

Jet lag is the effect of crossing one or several times zones really quickly, usually by plane, although it can happen by slower travel like car, bus, or boat as well. If you currently travel a lot for business, or are planning several vacations soon, this information will be invaluable to you as if you'll be able to get the most out of your travel, have better sleep when you travel and an increased level of energy!

The main challenge with jet lag happens because our body temperature rhythm doesn't adjust to a new time zone as quickly as we'd like it to. For example, when you live in Seattle and you travel to New York, while it's 11 PM in New York, your body thinks it's 8 PM, which would most likely result in you having difficulty falling asleep at night. In the same way, if you travel from Florida to California, and it's 8 PM in California, your body will think it's 11 PM, leaving you tired and drowsy earlier in the day.

Whenever you travel East, you are forced to sleep when you're not sleepy.

Whenever you travel West, you experience feelings of drowsiness and tiredness earlier than everyone else.

While crossing just 3 times zones may not pose much of a problem, crossing 4 or more time zones when you are on trans pacific/atlantic flights can cause a huge problem. The

time it takes to adjust to a new time zone varies from person to person. Usually it takes 24 hours per each time zone you crossed to adjust to that local time. However, most people experience jet lag for an average of 1-2 weeks when they're crossing 7 or more time zones.

What's the best way to combat this challenge?

Short Term Travel

If you're traveling into another time zone for only 1-2 days, this isn't enough time to adjust completely to that time zone, it's also not worth disrupting your body temperature rhythm. Therefore, the best choice you could make would be to conform with your regular sleeping schedule as much as possible on short term travel. If you frequently travel for short business trips, maintain your regular sleeping schedule at your destination, this will allow you to sleep better and be more alert while doing work!

Long Term / Vacation Travel

If you're traveling into another time zone for a week or longer, you will want to have a strategy to experience the most of your vacation or travel without the children always pointing at you saying "look, mom's a zombie!". The most common mistake amateur travelers make is setting out on a week journey into a foreign country expecting to set their body to that time zone instantly.

If you drastically fly over 7 or more time zones it could take a week or longer for you to fully adapt to that time schedule. During that adaptation period you may suffer from nausea, headaches, and constant disorientation, those aren't ideal conditions for enjoying your vacation!

If you're planning a long vacation and want to spend your time enjoying it as much as possible instead of starving for sleep, or trying to force sleep at night, take the following precautions to set your sleep clock up for the journey well in advance :

1) Proper Hydration

We've already explored how water is extremely important to your body temperature rhythm. This is something 99% of the population isn't aware of, so you're well ahead of the pack! However, don't forget that during high altitude flights we get completely dehydrated by the plane's low humidity environment.

When you fly in a plane for 8 hours this is sometimes the equivalent of running a marathon for your body, as you lose a lot of water. You may notice that your lips get really dry during a long flight. This is because there's almost zero humidity in the plane! This means water is literally evaporating out of you as if you were a puddle of cool aid on a hot summer day!

When you arrive at your new destination DRINK LOTS OF WATER IMMEDIATELY, and don't stop drinking throughout the day. If you immediately hydrate your body, adjusting to the new time zone will be much easier for you.

It's also a good idea to keep a water bottle with you on the plane. The little 100ml packages of water they give you on the plane really don't hydrate you! *Unless you fly in the business class section, then you might get the good water :o)*

2) Set your schedule in advance

The best strategy for going across several time zones is to start changing your sleeping schedule several days in advance to the trip.

For instance, if you are traveling from Los Angeles to Hawaii, begin waking up and sleeping earlier gradually 3 to 4 days in advance, this will minimize the jet lag effect when you arrive at your destination.

Adjust your meals and your light exposure as if you were to be already there and following that schedule.

3) Shock your Sleep System

When you arrive your destination, immediately adapt your sleeping schedule to the local time zone. For instance, if you arrive at 5 PM and you're feeling tired and drowsy, don't sleep! Wait it out and go to sleep at the time you normally would. This will put more pressure on your body temperature rhythm to adapt to the local time. If you try to adjust gradually it will just take longer and make your vacation time less enjoyable!

4) Artificial Bright Light

I always HIGHLY recommend bright light boxes to people who are serious about increasing the quality of their sleep and decreasing their sleep time. To remind you: A bright light box is a device that can produce artificial high intensity light at 5,000 to 10,000 luxes. They're great as they allow you to get proper high intensity light exposure when you're stuck in an office or working at home.

If you decide to invest in a bright light box, you will be able to use it to minimize jet lag. You can use the light box to instantly delay or advance the body temperature rise/drop.

For instance, if you were traveling west, you would need to delay your body temperature drop to stay awake longer in the western time zone. To do this, you would expose yourself to the light in the evening before you left, or upon arrival at your destination. You could also use the bright light box to help set your body temperature rhythm into another time zone several days in advance before you travel.

A certain company has actually developed a special bright light emitting visor/hat that's designed especially to help reduce jet lag. These are hats that emit from 500 - 2,500 luxes of light to your eyes, which you can wear while you're traveling on the plane. These are pretty pricy, but if you travel frequently owning one will put you miles ahead of all the other poor blokes suffering from jet lag. You can find a number of websites to purchase these hats online by simply searching for "light visors" in your favorite search engine.

Using these simple methods should minimize the jet lag effects you experience, and allow you get the most out of your traveling! If you find that you're still feeling very tired and low on energy during your vacation, take a short 10-45 minute nap to recharge yourself. As you know by know, the brief period of Stage 1 and 2 Sleep can be very rewarding.